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The first Zionist fake news marks its 120th anniversary, starring Herzl and the kaiser



The photomontage of the Mikveh Israel meeting. David Wolffsohn

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The first Zionist fake news was a doctored photo meant to capture a meeting between Theodor Herzl and Kaiser Wilhelm II — which really took place.

The meeting happened 120 years ago, on October 18, 1898, near the Mikveh Israel agricultural school

near Jaffa. Herzl was trying to convince the kaiser to grant a charter for the establishment of a Jewish state.

David Wolffsohn, another high-profile early Zionist, accompanied Herzl on his journey around the country and snapped a photo of the two leaders. But Wolffsohn, a businessman by profession, didn't manage to get Herzl into the frame. In-

stead, the kaiser is seen on a white horse, and only Herzl's foot is in the picture.

In pre-Photoshop days, it was customary to use a form of photomontage to "improve" pictures or photograph an "event" that actually never took place. In this case, Herzl was photographed once again, this time on the roof of a house in Jaffa holding his hat, and that picture was planted into the original photo. Also, the Kaiser was transferred to the black horse behind him, and the white horse was erased entirely.

The press reported excitedly on the meeting between Herzl and the kaiser. Evidence can be found in the Historical Jewish Press project, where a scan of an article from the Hebrew newspaper Hamagid can be seen. The story is dated November 10, 1898.

One of the paper's readers described in a letter to the editor: "My eyes are still wet with tears of joy at the wonderful sight At 9:20 A.M. in Mikveh Israel we heard the firing of the cannon in Jaffa, which announced 101 times that the kaiser of the Germans had set out from Jaffa to Jerusalem."

As the reader put it, "Another 25 minutes, and the Kaiser and his wife arrived with their entire retinue at the gates of Mikveh Israel, and at the time Dr. Herzl was also present among all the guests of Mikveh Israel.

"And when the kaiser passed Dr. Herzl, he held back the reins of his horse, and at that moment his en-

tire retinue and his wife stood. Kaiser Wilhelm II stretched out his hand to Dr. Herzl and greeted him, and Dr. Herzl asked him whether he had found pleasure in the journey, and about the hardships of the

road, and so on. And for a short time they spoke affectionately."

Herzl and the kaiser met later in Jerusalem, but the author of "The Jewish State" failed to persuade the German leader to influence the Turkish Sultan to grant a charter for the establishment of a Jewish state.

Well, at least that doctored photo entered history.

On Friday, the Herzl Center of the World Zionist Organization will recreate Herzl's trip to the Holy Land, 120 years after it took place.

When only Herzl's foot appeared in a photo with Wilhelm II, it was time for a 19th-century 'Photoshop' effort.